

Dissertation Abstract

Reasons, Rationality and the Wide-Scope Account of Instrumental Reason

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Philosophers traditionally accept that practical reason requires intending the means to your ends. But they often pay little attention to why or in what sense this is so. They discuss instrumental rationality largely to contrast it with, and sometimes for guidance on, the more controversial question of whether rationality requires having any particular ends. However in recent years philosophers have realized that instrumental rationality raises problems of its own. My dissertation addresses these problems and defends an account of instrumental reason designed to solve them.

It seems clear that practical rationality requires intending the necessary means to your ends. It is plainly irrational to intend to do *e*, believe that doing *m* is necessary for doing *e*, but not intend to do *m*. A theory of practical reason must account for this. A natural suggestion is the following principle:

- (1) If you intend to do *e* and believe that doing *m* is necessary for doing *e*, you ought to intend to do *m*.

The problem is that this natural principle seems false. If you intend to kill the president, or put all your green books on the roof, you nonetheless ought not to intend to hire an assassin, or take all your green books off the shelf. Intending an end cannot “bootstrap” into existence facts about what you ought to do. We thus need another way to account for the rationality of intending the means to your ends.

An attractive first move is to invoke different senses of ‘ought’. (1) is false, one might think, only if it is construed in terms of the all-things-considered sense of ‘ought’. In another sense of ‘ought’, (1) may still be true. Mark Schroeder defends a sophisticated version of this idea. Schroeder argues that there is a ‘subjective’ sense of ‘ought’ in which (1) is true. This is the sense in which, in Bernard Williams’ famous example, you should take a sip from your glass, although it contains petrol, because you think that it contains gin. I argue that (1) is not true even under Schroeder’s interpretation. The features that make it the case that you subjectively ought to take a sip are not present in all cases where the instrumental principle applies. More generally, I argue that there is no sense of ‘ought’ for which it is true both that if you intend an end, you ought to intend the means, and that failing to do so amounts to irrationality. The problem with (1) is not simply equivocation.

If the problem with (1) is not equivocation, it may instead be with its logical form. This is the guiding idea of the influential ‘wide-scope’ approach of John Broome, Jonathan Dancy and Stephen Darwall, amongst others. According to the standard wide-scope view, the instrumental principle is as follows:

- (WS) You ought [to intend to do *m*, if you intend to do *e* and believe that doing *m* is necessary for doing *e*].

WS evades the bootstrapping objection to (1). Even if you intend to put all your green books on the roof and think that this requires taking them off the shelf, WS does not imply that you ought to intend to take them off the shelf. Wide-scope ‘ought’s do not allow detachment.

I discuss a number of objections to the standard wide-scope view. Two I find particularly pressing are as follows. First, as Joseph Raz and Kieran Setiya have argued, plausible reason “transmission” principles seem to imply that the wide-scope view does, after all, allow for forms of bootstrapping. For example, if you are unable to give up the intention to kill the president, it may be that the only way to comply with WS is to intend to hire an assassin. It seems to follow that you ought to intend to hire an assassin. Second, as Niko Kolodny has argued, the view raises a question to which there appears to be no satisfying answer: what reason is there to conform to the instrumental principle? We can avoid this question by denying that there is reason to conform to the principle. But this requires giving up the intuitively compelling idea that rationality involves responding correctly to reasons. I suggest that this is too high a price to pay.

Motivated by these problems, I defend a new version of the wide-scope approach – the ‘wide-scope reasons’ view. This view makes two main claims:

- (WSR₁) The fact that doing *m* is necessary for doing *e* is conclusive reason to [intend to do *m*, if you intend to do *e*].
- (WSR₂) When you believe that doing *m* is necessary for doing *e*, rationality requires [intending to do *m*, if you intend to do *e*].

WSR₁ answers Kolodny’s question. The reason to [intend to do *m*, if you intend to do *e*] is just that doing *m* is necessary for doing *e*. I argue that this claim is independently plausible. It can be motivated by appeal to the more general idea that we have reason not to intend actions we are unable to perform. Further, given a plausible interpretation of the idea that rationality involves responding to reasons, WSR₂ is a consequence of WSR₁. We thus can and should maintain this intuitive idea.

WSR₁ also allows us to answer Raz and Setiya’s objections. I argue that these objections turn on the distinction between object- and state-given reasons. This distinction is familiar from discussion of the toxin puzzle and the “buck-passing” view of value. Object-given reasons depend on properties of the object of an attitude, state-given reasons depend on the benefits of having an attitude. I show that the transmission principles Raz and Setiya appeal to are valid only for state-given reasons. But I argue that WSR₁ is a claim about object-given reasons. The reason to [intend to do *m*, if you intend to do *e*] turns on the relation between doing *e* and doing *m*, and not on the benefits of [intending to do *m*, if you intend to do *e*]. It thus does not follow from WSR₁ that if you are unable to give up the intention to kill the president, you should intend to hire an assassin.